

'Sing, M(o)use': animal wars in the ancient world

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We are used in the modern world to stories that feature animals as the main characters. Here Matthew Hosty looks at some ancient examples of such stories in which the leading characters are mice...

Most of us will have read at least one book about talking animals. *Watership Down*, *Animal Farm*, *Redwall*, the works of Beatrix Potter, *The Fantastic Mr Fox*, *The Animals of Farthing Wood*: all popular and beloved books which use the central device of having their animal protagonists talk, act, and in some cases even dress like humans. This is to say nothing of the enormous number of animated films and TV series with talking animal characters. The Greeks and Romans, of course, knew the same trope: there are singing frogs in Aristophanes, and Horace tells a cautionary tale of the town mouse and the country mouse (*Satires* 2.6.77–117).

The *Batracho*-what?

The *Batrachomyomachia* – 'Clash of the Frogs and the Mice' – is an anonymous Greek poem, dating probably from the second century B.C. Although less than 300 lines long, it is written in the style of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*: it uses dactylic hexa-meter, the metre of Homer and of most ancient epic, and is full of unusual words and characteristic phrases borrowed from Homer. Instead of the Greeks and Trojans, though, it tells of a conflict between the rival tribes of the Mice and the Frogs.

The King of the Frogs offers to carry a young mouse prince across a pond on his back; when a hungry water-snake appears, the frog dives in terror to the bottom of the pond, leaving the mouse behind to drown. The other mice are furious, and vengefully declare war. The second half of the poem describes the brutal struggle between the two forces, with plenty of Homeric heroism and gory violence. The Mice gain the upper paw, and the poet says that the Frogs would have been destroyed completely; but Zeus decides to intervene, and sends a gang of crabs, who are too heavily-armoured and powerful even for the Mice and drive them back to their holes.

The poem is full of lovely touches. The characters all have names which reflect their natures: the betrayed mouse prince is called Psicharpax, which means 'Crumb-snatcher', and the King of the Frogs is Physignathus, 'Puff-cheek'. Other warriors include the mouse Tyroglyphus ('Cheese-nibbler') and the frog Crambobates ('Cabbage-treader'). Both sides, rather like Mary Norton's *Borrowers*, make their equipment out of appropriately-sized materials: the Mice use sewing-needles as spears and lamp-lids as shields, while the Frogs carry spiky rushes and wear snail-shells on their heads.

The goddess Athene refuses to lend her assistance to either army, annoyed because the Frogs croak outside her bedroom window and stop her sleeping, while the Mice have chewed holes in her new dress. At the end of the poem, the rampaging Mice are so powerful that they even frighten the gods: Zeus hurls a thunderbolt to scare them off, but the Mice ignore it!

These charms made the *Batrachomyomachia* very popular throughout much of history: it was widely read in the Byzantine Empire, where it may well have been used as a school-text for students trying to get to grips with Homer, and it was one of the first Greek literary texts (perhaps the first) ever to be printed on a mechanical press, in about 1474. None the less, it has mostly been treated by Classical scholarship as a curio – a peculiar one-off, worth a read but of little interest from an academic point of view. The evidence suggests, however, that it was anything but a one-off; it may in fact be our only surviving example of an entire artistic genre.

Another mouse epic

In 1983 a scholar named Hermann Schibli published an Egyptian papyrus from the

second or first centuries B.C. (known to papyrologists as *P.Mich. inv. 6946*), which contains about 40 damaged lines of Greek verse. What we can read is enough to show that the poem is written in Homeric hexameters, and tells how a mouse called Trixus ('Squeaky') was killed in battle against a fearsome weasel. There is a description of his wife grieving for him, and then the other mice gather together for a council of war, at which they are addressed by a wise old mouse called Myleus ('Miller', from the fact that the mill was a frequent target for mice). Sadly, no more survives, but even the sample we have displays a clear debt to Homer in its phrasing – particularly to the description of the assembly held on Ithaca in *Odyssey* book 24. In other words, this is a second mouse-epic in the style of Homer. (Schibli coined the name *Galeomyomachia*, 'Weasel-Mouse War', on the model of *Batrachomyomachia*, but this is never found in ancient texts.)

Weasels, unlike frogs, would have been a very natural enemy for Greek mice. The domestic cat was not introduced to Greece until relatively late, and many Greek sources refer to the weasel as the mouse's main domestic predator: if the Greeks had made *Tom & Jerry*, Tom would certainly have been a weasel. Aristophanes uses 'mouse-and-weasel stories' to mean 'childish tales not fit for sophisticated company' (*Wasps* 1185). In countries which did have cats, meanwhile – like Egypt – the mice had been at war for a very long time. A much older papyrus, this one from the Ramesside period (13th–11th centuries B.C.), includes an elaborate doodle of a mouse army (see above), led by a mouse Pharaoh in a dog-drawn chariot, besieging a fortress defended by cats.

The anthropomorphism in this picture is striking: the cat fortress is made of bricks, and the fighters are using bows, spears, shields, siege-ladders, and all the apparatus of contemporary warfare. The depiction of the chief mouse drawing a bow from his chariot imitates the way Pharaohs were sometimes shown in battle-scenes. It is also interesting that the mice, contrary to what we might expect, are attacking. This may have been part of the joke, on the principle of the 'world turned upside-down' – the predators have

become the prey.

Imagining mouse wars

The war between the cats and the mice (sometimes rats) went on to become a popular image: it turns up in a Coptic wall-painting from the seventh or eighth centuries A.D. and a number of English woodcut illustrations from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as (oddly enough) among the murals of the twelfth-century Chapel of St John in Pügg, Austria. In each case the forces are armed with up-to-date military equipment: for example, by the seventeenth century the mice have gained halberds and cannon. What we lack is any pictures of Classical mouse warfare. But we can be fairly certain they existed.

In perhaps the first century A.D., the Roman author C. Julius Phaedrus composed Latin verse translations of a collection of Aesop's fables. Among these is the fable of 'The Mice and Their Generals', which gives an anecdote from a mouse war against the hated weasels. Again the mice use human-style equipment – their commanders wear elaborate helmets which end up sealing their doom. Phaedrus calls the story of the mouse-weasel war 'a tale which is painted up in all the taverns', although it is hard to know whether we should take this as literally true or part of the joke.

We have no archaeological evidence for warrior mice on ancient tavern walls, but Phaedrus seems to regard them as a common sight. We can only speculate on how such murals would have looked: mouse hoplites? Mice in legionary armour, with siege-towers and *ballistae*? If the scene was familiar from tavern art, though, it is hardly surprising that writers would have hit on the idea of representing the same battle in the form of verse epic – the standard medium for narrating grand battles in the ancient world.

Back to the origins of warring mice

There is one more clue. The *Batrachomyomachia* seems originally to have been known only as the *Batrachomachia*, 'Frog War': the *-myo-*element was added much later. This seems to be modelled on words like *Titanomachia* and *Gigantomachia*, the wars of the Olympian gods against the Titans and Giants respectively. The Byzantine encyclopaedia we call the *Suda* mentions several short poems attributed to Homer: the *Geranomachia*, *Psaromachia*, and *Arachnomachia* – or Wars of the Cranes, Starlings, and Spiders. Modern scholarship has tended to assume that the *Geranomachia* described the conflict which Homer himself mentions at the beginning of *Iliad* 3 between the Cranes

and the Pygmies, and this may well be right. But what of the Starlings and Spiders? Both species, of course, would have made appropriately-sized and interesting foes for mice.

Plutarch in his *Life of Agesilaus* records a joke supposedly made by Alexander the Great about one of his generals:

it seems, gentlemen, that while we've been fighting Darius, there's been a mouse-war (myomachia) going on in Arcadia.

The Greeks hit on the idea of turning the traditional motif of the mice against the cats/weasels into a Homeric epic poem; then someone went further and decided to write a sequel, in which the Mice went to war against the Frogs. (We know the *Batrachomyomachia* poet was familiar with mouse-weasel stories, as the poem alludes to them twice.) Why stop at frogs? Perhaps the *myomachiae*, the *Mouse Iliads*, were a series: perhaps the dauntless Mice went on to clash with swift-winged Starlings and the guile-weaving tribe of Spiders. At any rate, the combined testimony of the papyrus published by Schibli and Phaedrus' claim about tavern-paintings suggests that far from being a one-off, the *Batrachomyomachia* was originally only one example of warrior mice in the Classical world.

From the Ramesside papyrus, through Homeric hexameter and sixteenth-century woodcuts, to modern children's books like Brian Jacques' *Redwall* novels, the Mice have been taking up arms against all manner of foes for at least three thousand years – a struggle longer than any human empire has ever managed. So if you're scared of mice, you're in good company, and if you're not, perhaps you should be: as Athene worriedly points out in the *Batrachomyomachia*: 'they're fierce fighters, even if a god should come against them'.

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